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## The paradox in international cooperation: Institutionally embedded universities in a global environment

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**Abstract.** As a response to processes of globalisation and regional integration, internationalisation activities in universities have changed. Flows have become more massive, the range of activities has broadened, and internationalisation has shifted from a marginal activity to a central institutional issue with strategic importance (van der Wende 2001, *European Journal of Education* 36(4), 431–441). These shifts can also be observed in international cooperation among universities. One of the manifestations of this shift is the increase and change of inter-organisational arrangements in higher education. One type of such arrangements – higher education consortia – are analysed in detail in the study. This analysis takes inter-organisational diversity as a starting point (Parkhe 1991, *Journal of International Business Studies* 22(4), 579–601). The basic thesis is that partners need to be similar, yet different, or in other words, there needs to be sufficient complementarity as well as sufficient compatibility among the participating universities. The article also explores the ways in which the management of consortia can improve the levels of complementarity and compatibility and thus the success of such consortia.

**Keywords:** embeddedness, globalization, internationalization, international cooperation, inter-organisational cooperation, neo-institutionalism, regional integration, resource-based view

### Background of the study

This article is based on a study that looks at international inter-organisational arrangements in higher education and attempts to identify the critical features of a specific type of inter-organisational arrangements: *Higher Education Consortia*. Higher education consortia can be defined as multi-point groupings of higher education institutions which have a limited amount of members and where membership is restricted to particular institutions that are allowed by the other partners to enter the arrangement (Beerkens 2002). Also they have an indefinite time-span, therefore they are not meant to be dissolved at a particular moment. Cooperation takes place in several activities, cov-

ering multiple disciplines and/or themes. International higher education consortia can be seen as a horizontal arrangement between higher education institutions which are based on equity and where collaboration takes place through coordination. The arrangements exceed loose cooperation, since an additional administrative layer is created above the participating organisations. On the other hand, the arrangements are not meant to lead to amalgamation, at least not in the foreseeable future.

This paper situates the subject of study in the contemporary context of globalisation and ongoing regional integration and it provides a theoretical framework for inter-organisational cooperation in higher education. We will first explore what features of international higher education consortia can explain the performance of these consortia and secondly, we will look at the types of mechanisms that can be adopted by international higher education consortia in order to increase performance. The assumption that the nature of internationalisation activities in higher education has changed and that the emergence and increase of international higher education consortia is related to processes of globalisation and regionalization (van Vught et al. 2002; van der Wende and Middlehurst 2004) formed a starting point in this study. Globalisation is defined as a process in which basic social arrangements become disembedded from their spatial context due to the acceleration, massification and flexibilisation of transnational flows of people, products, finance, images and information (Beerrens 2003). This process is also apparent in basic social arrangements within and outside universities. The shifts taking place in higher education due to processes of globalisation are major drivers behind the emergence of international inter-organisational arrangements. Although it is argued that globalisation and regionalisation processes are significant, one also needs to acknowledge that in many ways, society is still very much rooted in nationally constructed institutions. This is especially true for universities, of which the majority were established and developed in a national institutional context. “Despite all the research demonstrating the growing importance of internationalisation, and even more the rethoric in this respect, higher education institutions’ behaviour (including their internationalisation strategies) are (still) mostly guided by national regulatory and funding frameworks. For internationalisation in particular, historical, geographic, cultural and linguistic aspects of the national framework are of great importance” (Huisman and Van der Wende, 2005, p. 206). The study shows that this paradox – in which universities face global opportunities while being strongly embedded in

national institutional environments – also becomes apparent in higher education consortia.

### **The paradox of cooperation in a global environment**

For the study of cooperation between organisations, various disciplinary perspectives can be applied. There are theories from policy studies and political science on policy networks, perspectives on cooperation from international relations theorists, approaches from sociology such as social network analysis and psychological and anthropological perspectives on cooperation. Also in the field of higher education research various studies on cooperation have been conducted. An exploration of approaches in various disciplines, ultimately brought us to theories from strategic management and international business. Here, after the strong increase in inter-firm constellations like strategic alliances and joint ventures in the 1980s, a wide range of studies on international cooperation between firms has emerged. In examining determinants of consortium performance, the study focuses on a unique aspect associated with the characteristics of partners involved in an alliance, namely inter-organisational diversity (Parkhe 1991). An interesting paradox, which forms the core of the argument, is that alliances or consortia are based on both compatibility as well as complementarity. It is suggested that performance is likely to be enhanced when organisations are able to manage the paradox involved in choosing a partner that is different, yet similar.

This principle can be traced back to two perspectives on the behaviour of firms, or in our case, universities. The idea that organisations cooperate in order to gain access to resources finds its origins in the resource-based view of the firm (RBV). In the RBV (Wernerfelt 1984; Barney 1991), organisations are seen as a bundle of resources. The RBV introduced an alternative perspective for the prevailing models of strategic management in the 1980s, where emphasis was placed on analysing a firm's opportunities and threats in the competitive environment (Caves and Porter 1977; Porter 1980, 1985). This model claims that firms within a particular industry are identical in terms of the resources they control and the strategies they pursue and that, where heterogeneity occurs, this will be very short lived because resources are highly mobile. According to Barney (1991), the RBV substitutes these for two alternative assumptions. First the RBV assumes that firms within an industry may be heterogeneous with respect to the strategic resources they control. Second, the perspective assumes that these re-

sources may not be perfectly mobile across firms, and thus heterogeneity can be long lasting. The RBV thus suggests that a degree of heterogeneity tends to be sustained over time (Peteraf 1993). Some resource characteristics that prevent firms from moving toward resource homogeneity have been identified as: imperfect mobility, imperfect imitability, and imperfect substitutability (Barney 1991). The resource-based view claims that the rationale for alliances is the value-creation potential of firm resources that are pooled together (Das and Teng 2000). Reciprocal strengths and complementary resources, or a “fit” between partners are identified as a premise for successful consortia. A key implication of the RBV is that organisations will search for partners that will bring about some sort of fit or synergy between their resources and those of their targeted partner. This view can also be applied to cooperation between universities. The strategic resources of a university that are interesting for international partners can be very diverse, ranging from physical resources like research facilities or library collections, to educational resources such as specific programmes or teaching methods, human resources, or more symbolic organisational resources like reputation and prestige. Although these are not traded on factor markets, these can be accessed through engaging in a cooperative arrangement.

The conceptual origins of the second issue – compatibility – can be traced back to economic sociology. The argument that more compatible partners will be more successful in collaboration is related to Evans’ (1963) “similarity hypotheses”: the more similar the parties, the more likely a favourable outcome. While the resource-based view propagates an economic rational perspective on organisational behaviour, sociological theories look upon the university as an institution embedded in powerful cognitive, normative and regulative structures (Scott 1995). In neo-institutional theories and embeddedness theories, the social, political and cultural environment is brought in. Much of embeddedness research seeks to demonstrate that market exchange is embedded in larger and more complex social processes. This builds on Polanyi’s (1944) notion of embeddedness which puts forward that “the human economy is embedded and enmeshed in institutions, economic and non-economic”. The institutional embeddedness of organisations provides opportunities as well as constraints for their behaviour. On the one hand the context they are embedded in provides them legitimacy, clarity, relationships with their stakeholders etc. On the other hand, it places organisations in an “institutional straightjacket” or an “iron cage” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). This is what Uzzi labels the paradox of embeddedness: the same processes, by which embeddedness

creates a requisite fit with the current environment, can paradoxically reduce an organisation's ability to adapt (Uzzi 1997: 57). In this way, traditional "core competencies" have the potential to become "core rigidities" that inhibit subsequent adaptation and success (Leonard-Barton 1992). This notion, if applied to inter-organisational combinations, claims that the differences in the institutional environments where the organisations come from, can impact cooperation in a negative way. Inter-organisational differences that can frustrate the performance of the collaboration are frequently related to the historical conformance of universities to their national institutional environment and to organisational structures, procedures and routines that have emerged and have become institutionalised in this national context.

The problem however, with the theoretical notions above is that once a consortium is established, its level of performance would be set (as long as the composition of members would not change). However, like any other organisation, consortia can adapt to changing circumstances. In other words, consortia can employ mechanisms to enhance compatibility and complementarity in situations where these are not optimal. Mechanisms to cope with a lack of complementarity "strategic coping mechanisms" are instruments that make a better fit of resources between the members possible. This can for instance take place by making the resources of the various members transparent, by stimulating individuals from member universities to exploit complementary resources more effectively or by acquiring resources that can exploit complementarity between member universities. "Institutional coping mechanisms" on the other hand, are employed to lessen the effect of the contextual differences of the participating universities in order to increase the compatibility between the participants.

In sequential terms, one can thus approach cooperation as a process where a joint decision on consortium objectives and a corresponding portfolio of activities is made, and where subsequently, activities are implemented in order to make use of value creating resources. After the implementation starts, the consortium can let those activities take their course, with a particular performance as the end result. However, pressures for efficiency and effectiveness will create a demand for more complementarity, which in turn will be handled through the employment of strategic coping mechanisms. Also, pressures for conformity and resistance will create a demand for greater compatibility, for which institutional coping mechanisms will be employed. The employment of such coping mechanisms will then improve the end result of the collaborative activities.

The framework above enabled us to formulate four basic hypotheses on cooperation in consortia:

*Explanatory propositions:*

- (1) The higher the level of complementarity between partners in a consortium, the higher the level of performance of the consortium.
- (2) The higher the level of compatibility between partners in a consortium, the higher the level of performance of the consortium

*Exploratory propositions:*

- (3) In case of insufficient complementarity, consortia will employ strategic coping mechanisms in order to enhance performance.
- (4) In case of insufficient compatibility, consortia will employ institutional coping mechanisms in order to enhance performance.

## **From theory to practice: methodology and operationalisation**

### *Research design*

This study is based on both quantitative and qualitative data obtained by a case study approach and on a combination of explanatory and explorative research guided by the above mentioned theoretical framework. The explanatory part is founded on the two basic explanatory propositions which can be tested on the basis of a sound operationalisation of the concepts of performance, compatibility and complementarity. The explorative part is aimed at exploring the ways consortia adapt to circumstances of incompatibility and a lack of complementarity, with the objective to identify specific types of institutional and strategic coping mechanisms.

A choice was made for a sample of consortia that are very diverse in size (ranging from 4 to 38 universities), consortia that existed for at least 5 years, and consortia that possess a rather high level of visibility. Since Europe shows a high level of activity in the field of inter-university cooperation, this region was a logical region to focus on. To not focus solely on European developments, one consortium was chosen outside

Europe. The choice was made for Southeast Asia because the ASEAN region also displays a rather high level of integration and an adequate knowledge base about higher education in this region was available. Other obvious criteria were that the consortia should still be active and that the consortia would be willing to actively cooperate in the research. Ultimately this led to the choice for four consortia:

- Coimbra Group: a consortium of 38 traditional comprehensive universities spread over Europe, including countries outside the EU.
- European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU): a consortium of 10 innovative and entrepreneurial universities spread over Western Europe.
- ALMA Network: a group of four universities from the Meuse Rhine Euregion covering parts of the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia (respectively, the Dutch and French speaking part of Belgium) and Nordrhein Westfalen (Germany)
- ASEAN University Network: a consortium of 17 comprehensive universities from the ten ASEAN member countries.

The data were obtained through a survey of the individual members of the participating universities (i.e. international relations officers, academics, support personnel, outreach personnel, etc.). We received 188 questionnaires (a likely response of 39.2%) from 61 universities in 38 countries. In addition, to analyse the development of the consortia over time, their origins and the mechanisms that they employ, we interviewed a limited number of persons that represent the consortium as a whole (instead of the participating university) like chairmen of executive boards, directors of secretariats, etc. Also documents were used like memorandums of understandings, strategic plans, policy plans, minutes of meetings and workshops, etc.

### *Operationalisation and research instruments*

In the operationalisation phase, the main concepts are translated and broken down into measurable items. Resources that determine the level of *complementarity* and factors that control the level of compatibility had to be deduced from secondary sources and logical reasoning. For the case of complementarity, the resource-based view does list particular types of strategic resources, and these have consequently been “translated” for the case of universities<sup>2</sup>. For this list of strategic resources respondents were asked to state whether these form an important mo-



tive for cooperation and whether they were present at the partner universities. The combination of these two questions for the total list of resources forms the measure for complementarity. For the operationalisation of *compatibility*, other typologies and categorisations of institutions were used (Ingram and Clay 2000; Ingram and Silverman 2002) and again, applied these for the specific cases of universities.<sup>3</sup> Respondents were asked to state whether differences in these items negatively or positively affected cooperation and whether the consortium could be seen as homogeneous or heterogeneous for this specific item. Eventually, this leads to a certain level of compatibility. For *performance* we used a combined measurement of the importance and attainment of the consortium objectives. These formal objectives obviously differ for each of the consortia.<sup>4</sup>

Since the concept of coping mechanisms in the research is a concept that needs to be explored in this study, this cannot be operationalised in a detailed way. Respondents were however asked if measures were taken for a list of possible obstacles in cooperation and if so, what kind of measures and by whom the measures were taken. Unlike the previous concepts, which were mainly measured through indications on a five point Likert Scale, the questions on the measures taken were open questions. Interviews were loosely structured and focused on the establishment of the consortium, the general development of the consortium and the changes that have taken place in the strategies and policies of the consortium on specific items related to complementarity and compatibility.

### **Performance in higher education consortia: confronting theory with reality**

A summary of the data is presented in the two tables below. The values of the dependent and independent variables are given in weighted Z scores in Table 1. The relationship between “Consortium Performance” (the dependent variable) and the independent variables “complementarity” and “compatibility” is presented in Table 2 and expressed in the  $R^2$  and the Beta coefficients that resulted from a multiple regression analysis.

The analysis of the quantitative data from the questionnaire made apparent that our theoretical models of cooperation did not fully predict the performance of cooperation and did not explain the process of cooperation to a full extent. The positive relation between complementarity and performance is at least observable for two cases (for three

Table 1. Performance indicators and independent variables (weighted Z scores)

	ALMA	AUN	Coimbra	ECIU
<i>Performance indicator</i>				
Overall Consortium Performance	-0.49	0.42	0.42	-0.42
<i>Independent variables</i>				
Complementarity	-0.23	0.42	-0.02	-0.17
Compatibility	-0.40	0.31	0.18	-0.09

if the significance level is set to  $p < 0.1$ ). The positive relationship between compatibility and performance was only significantly apparent for one case. This could to a large extent be explained on the basis of the qualitative data obtained from the questionnaires, interviews and documents. In this section we will reflect on the theoretical approaches and the proposed models of cooperation.

### *An explanatory model of collaboration*

In our explanatory hypotheses, it was argued that there is a positive relation between complementarity and performance and between compatibility and performance. The case studies have shown that this is the case only under particular conditions.

Performance will be affected positively by the existence of complementarity under the condition that the complementary resources are actually recognised, utilised and exploited, which can be accomplished if the appropriate strategic coping mechanisms are employed. In turn, strategic coping mechanisms can be more effectively applied if there is

Table 2.  $R^2$  and Beta coefficients of regression equations

	ALMA	AUN	Coimbra	ECIU
$R^2$	0.398	0.144	0.301	0.118
Beta (Complementarity)	-0.279	0.331*	0.322**	0.327 <sup>+</sup>
Beta (Compatibility)	0.567**	0.063	-0.089	0.072

<sup>+</sup> Significant at the 0.1 level.

\* Significant at the 0.05 level.

\*\* Significant at the 0.01 level.

adequate communication, organisation and commitment. The proposed positive relation between complementarity and performance can thus be maintained under the condition that the suitable coping mechanisms are employed in order to recognise, utilise and exploit the complementarity in resources. Furthermore, this positive effect will benefit from the presence of good communication, clear organisation and a high level of commitment.

Compatibility is also related to performance, but not as linear as proposed. In this case, it might be better to claim that the level of incompatibility is negatively related to performance. For the achievements of objectives, a minimum level of compatibility is needed. If the level of institutional fit is insufficient, this negatively influences performance. If minimum requirements are met, this influence diminishes. However, it is uncertain whether this is the case for more complex forms of integration of activities. It remains likely that the need for a good level of fit becomes all the more necessary if complex forms of cooperation are aimed for. In our cases, the activities within the frameworks of the consortia in general do not require a high level of integration. It is probable that if tight integration is required, the compatibility of institutional contexts does affect the success of cooperation. According to the complexity of the cooperation, consortia can employ institutional coping mechanisms in order to make differences transparent, to communicate them to the persons involved. More complex institutional coping mechanisms can be employed when it is necessary to reduce or totally nullify the differences. Such complex mechanisms encompass mutual adjustment or incorporation of differences. Again, such complex mechanisms require adequate communication, organisation and commitment.

The employment of coping mechanisms will thus not always have a (positive) impact, but they need to be suitable for the level and nature of incomplementarity or incompatibility encountered in the course of cooperation. It is thus the mixture of existing complementarity and compatibility with the appropriate strategic and institutional coping mechanisms that affect performance. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the employed coping mechanisms will benefit from good relation management in the form of ample communication, clear organisation and sufficient commitment.

This brings us to the final and most significant revision: the quality of relationship management as an intervening variable. Relation management refers to the measures that consortia take in order to improve communication, the creation of a stable and clear organisational structure and the increase of commitment. A good communi-

cation strategy and a clear and transparent organisation of a relatively stable nature support processes of socialisation in sub units of the consortium which then will reflect on the consortium as a whole. It is argued here that consortium management is a combination of the employment of coping mechanisms to increase complementarity and compatibility in combination with "relationship management", that is the facilitation of the rise of commitment through communication and organisation. If this relationship management is conducted satisfactorily, more complex coping mechanisms can be employed, and in turn, complementarity and compatibility between members can be better exploited which again increases the chances for success for the consortium as a whole.

Compatibility thus only matters up till a specific level and coping mechanisms need to be appropriate for the level of complexity of the objectives. The new variable in the model is the quality of relationship management, or in other words, the satisfaction with the communication, organisation and commitment in the consortium. Furthermore, the importance of this added variable increases as the complexity of the objectives increases.

### *The process of collaboration*

We approached cooperation as a process where a joint decision on consortium objectives and a corresponding portfolio of activities was made, and where subsequently, activities were implemented in order to make use of value creating resources. After projects are implemented, the consortium can let activities take their course, with a particular performance as the end result. However, in the implementation phase, pressures for effectiveness and efficiency will call for more complementarity, while pressures for conformity and resistance demands greater compatibility between the partners.

This approach has proved useful as a way of looking at cooperation, but nevertheless it does include some flaws. First of all, it looks at the consortium as a whole, while it might be better to perceive the consortia under investigation in this study as a collection of cooperative activities. One of the dimensions that was distinguished was the fact that the higher education consortia are multi-point alliances, engaged in a wide array of activities. This is also likely to result in different outcomes and different levels of success for different consortium activities. But it is also possible that different types of activities develop in different ways and

that it therefore is difficult to develop a general sequential model for the process of cooperation in consortia. It was observed that in some projects in some consortia, the consortium as a whole plays an important role in the initiation of the projects and the facilitation in the early stages, but where they continue more or less outside the framework of the consortium after they have matured.

The most evident flaw in the approach has been the lack of attention that is paid to the relations between partners. It has become clear through the case studies that the relations among the individuals of the member universities play an important role in the employment of complex coping mechanisms. Because of the importance of the relations between the persons involved, communication, organisation and commitment within the consortium become imperative factors in the ultimate outcomes of cooperation. Improving the relations between those involved in the consortium activities is best focused on the provision of sufficient and good communication, providing a clear organisational structure for the activities and promoting commitment of the member universities and their representatives. The attention for the relational issues should be apparent throughout the process of cooperation, from the decision making on the broad objectives to the implementation of concrete activities.

A final adjustment that has to be made is the inclusion of "feedback loops". Once coping mechanisms are employed, this does not automatically lead to the progress or finalisation of projects, but coping mechanisms frequently imply that the consortium needs to take a step backwards. This can take the form of seeking new members, of finding new objectives or new activities, applying different incentives in the implementation of activities. In some cases this would imply minor adjustments, while in others this might lead to a whole new direction of the consortium. These mechanisms will then be employed in the expectation that the activities will develop correctly after implementing them. If new problems are encountered due to incomplementarity or incompatibility, new coping mechanisms need to be employed and one needs to return to the appropriate phase. Subsequently the consortium attempts to arrive at the ultimate result which is satisfactory enough for the members. The last statement also adds an important issue. Most of the objectives of consortia are rather ambiguous and do not contain a specific and concrete end result. Consortia will not always continue until optimal results are achieved but they will strive to an end result where there is a consensus on the adequacy of the level of goal achievement. In other words, consortia appear to be more geared

towards the performance satisfaction than towards the performance optimisation.

*Universities and the resource-based view*

Our proposed relation between complementarity and performance was based on a resource-based view of universities. The exchange of resources were hypothesised to be the most important rationale for cooperation and for engaging in higher education consortia. It was observed that it is not fully in line with reality to perceive higher education consortia merely as vehicles for obtaining strategic resources. Although using this perspective in this study has proved to be useful, other approaches to cooperation in consortia are also applicable. Higher education consortia can for instance also be perceived as vehicles to reduce transaction costs, something that was mainly seen in the case of Coimbra. Through integration of specific activities, transactions such as student mobility and staff exchange can take place in an administrative framework by which such transactions can be executed more efficiently. Another, more political, rationale for cooperation is also apparent in some of the case studies. This is the collective representation of universities vis-à-vis international and regional authorities such as the EU or ASEAN. By operating collectively, consortia can open up policy channels to gain better access to these authorities. Another rationale is more instrumentally in nature: universities simply cooperate because this is demanded by several financial providers. Many of the EU programmes in education and in research provide funding for cooperative research and education under the condition that applications come from multiple universities from multiple countries.

In spite of these alternative explanations, the resource-based view as a new way of looking at cooperation is valuable. Inherent to strategic management research, the resource-based view is prescriptive in nature, and therefore it makes us aware of the opportunities that arise through cooperation in an international context. At the same time, it makes clear that from this perspective, these international opportunities remain rather unexploited by the consortia that were analysed in this study. Sometimes this was because universities simply did not aim for it. In other cases, it has become clear that many universities – and countries – are not yet prepared or able to engage in intense and close collaboration with foreign partners.

*Universities and their institutional embeddedness*

The lack of willingness or capacity to be involved in close and intense cooperation is related to the institutional contexts in which the universities operate and have developed. This institutional perspective was used to support the notion that members in a consortium also have to share some similarities in order to cooperate because universities are very much embedded in their (nationally and organisationally moulded) institutional contexts. This assumption does not need to be rejected. The impact on cooperation is however less straightforward than expected. First, evidence was found that different institutional forms influence cooperation in different ways. In all consortia that were studied, the impact of centralised institutional forms like national laws and organisational rules were perceived to have a negative impact on cooperation. This was much less the case for decentralised institutional norms like culture, norms and beliefs. The latter were by many seen as one of the interesting factors involved in cooperation. Academic and cultural diversity thus can – with the right attitude – be a main source of complementarity instead of incompatibility.

It was also observed that non-academics seem to place more emphasis on the institutional differences in their assessment of the performance of the consortia (while academics seem to place more emphasis on complementarity factors). This would mean that the institutional embeddedness of the university is more apparent in the eyes of non-academics than for academics. This could be explained by the reasoning that the activities on which academics cooperate are of a more universal nature than is the case for non-academics. In this respect it would be interesting to compare cooperation in different academic disciplines. Sciences for instance could be assumed to be less context related and more universal than social sciences and humanities, and would therefore present less sources of incompatibility in cooperative activities.

In general, there is not a strong relation between performance success and compatibility. Only in the cases where the institutional fit between the universities is perceived as low, this has hampered cooperation. This leads us to the conclusion that a minimum level of institutional fit is required, but that universities and their staff are very well capable to handle obstacles that arise due to incompatibility. On the other hand, it was also observed that most consortia do not pursue very close cooperation and tight integration. It is likely that if the intensity of cooperation increases, the discrepancies in institutional

contexts become more apparent and more obstructive to cooperation. In this regard it is useful to keep attention for compatibility factors in cooperation, especially in cases where tight integration is foreseen, such as (private) joint ventures set up by universities from different countries and (future) mergers between higher education institutions from different countries.

This conclusion and the data do not necessarily point to a convergence of the institutional contexts of universities. On the contrary, the differences in national institutional contexts are still widely apparent and still substantially influence the activities of universities in the eyes of the respondents in this study. What can be observed however, is that universities also become embedded in regional contexts. Naturally, this regional institutional context is likely to become a bigger influence in the case where regional institutions are stronger. Even though the national context is evidently predominant, for European universities the regional context has an increasing influence on a university's behaviour. In the case of ASEAN the formation of regional institutions is still in an earlier stage compared to Europe, but aspirations like joint accreditation and joint credit transfer systems give the impression that this region is going to a similar direction (albeit not necessary in the same speed). What is especially relevant for the study is that adaptation to this regional context is beneficial for the performance of consortia. The consortia that were very much connected to regional (political) institutions and that had adapted their activities to the programmes and policies (and the available funding) of these institutions (e.g. the European programmes for mobility and cooperation), seem to be more successful. Thus, like in organisational studies, where the adaptation to the external environment of organisations is seen as an important determinant for an organisation's performance, this argument can be extended to consortia as well: regional higher education consortia that adapt to their regional environment are more successful.

### **Conclusions: critical factors in the performance of consortia**

It was argued that the performance of higher education consortia can be explained on the basis of the complementarity in the consortium, the compatibility in the consortium and the coping mechanisms employed by the consortium. On the basis of the comparative analysis of the case studies various critical aspects of higher education consortia were identified.



First, the consortium has to exist of members that possess resources which are strategically valuable for the other members. In plain language, this means that the partners in a consortium have to be able to offer each other something. If this would not be the case at all, the consortium as a vehicle for resource exchange would be pointless. In general it was observed that various sources of complementarity can nearly always be found between groups of universities. The fact that complementarity is present however, does not always mean that they are known by the right persons and that they are utilised and exploited.

This brings us to the second aspect. Sources of complementarity need to be accompanied by the appropriate strategic coping mechanisms. These coping mechanisms are aimed at the acquisition, identification, dissemination and exploitation of complementary resources. In general, closer cooperation and tighter integration requires more complex coping mechanisms that are aimed at the exploitation of complementary resources. This can be done by creating sufficient incentives and motivations for staff of universities to commit themselves to consortium activities. This can be accomplished by adapting the consortium activities to the existing activities in the universities, by adapting them to wider regional programmes in order to access funding or by creating internal (financial) incentives or obligations to become active in the consortium activities.

A third critical aspect of higher education consortia is related to the differences in the institutional contexts in which the members operate. It was claimed that higher compatibility in the consortium leads to higher performance of the consortium. It was however observed that the condition of compatible backgrounds is valid in order for cooperation to be successful. For less complex forms of cooperation, only a minimum level of institutional fit has to be present in the consortium. It is argued however that when cooperation becomes more complex, a higher level of institutional fit becomes necessary.

The fit between institutional contexts however, is not something that universities fully control. They can however employ institutional coping mechanisms in order to deal with the problems that arise through difference, in order to lessen those differences or in order to abolish the differences. Dealing with obstacles generally occurs through information on existing differences in institutional contexts of the members, and through familiarisation with existing institutional contexts through meetings, seminars or courses. Another way of efficiently dealing with such obstacles is to set up joint administrative structures to efficiently

deal with specific exchange requirements. The more complex institutional coping mechanisms are aimed at actively changing the differences between members. Here one can refer to mutual adjustment of universities and the abolishing of differences through incorporation of these differences.

Additional characteristics that contribute to the performance of higher education consortia are related to what we have termed relationship management. In the case of close cooperation and tight integration this becomes more important. Relation management refers to the measures that consortia take in order to improve communication, the creation of a stable and clear organisational structure and the increase of commitment. A good communication strategy and a clear and transparent organisation of a relatively stable nature support processes of socialisation in subunits of the consortium which then will reflect on the consortium as a whole.

A final point that can be made here is that a consortium, like any other organisation, needs to adapt to its internal and external environment. This means that when the activities are compatible with the prevailing norms and beliefs in the universities, and with the ongoing developments on the regional level (e.g. frameworks for mobility and cooperation, such as the ERASMUS program), they are more likely to be successful. However, when this results in a risk avoiding strategy, this will not always correspond with the strategic global needs and opportunities that a consortium and its universities face in an increasing competitive environment. The seizing of those opportunities frequently requires taking risks that are not in line with traditional views of the university, but that will more effectively exploit the complementarity in the consortium.

In retrospect, it can be concluded that the opportunities that are available, or could be available, in higher education consortia (and probably also in other inter-organisational arrangements) are rarely fully exploited. The most successful forms of cooperation are still based on rather loose structures that do not significantly impact the organisations of the member universities. This does not imply that they fail in their task, since a tight integration of activities is not part of their agenda. Where this is the case, non-optimal outcomes of projects or activities are more likely. Close cooperation between organisations that attach considerable value to their autonomy and independency will be very difficult, since university leaders will be hesitant to delegate authority to a higher level and academics will be hesitant to shift their loyalties.

## Notes

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1. The following sources for complementarity were identified: proximity of a partner university; country of a partner university; access to new student markets; language of instruction in a partner university; financial resources of a partner university; physical infrastructure and facilities of a partner university; academic quality in research of a partner university; academic quality in education of a partner university; management and leadership quality in a partner university; the existing external relations of a university; the reputation of a partner university; standard of the use of ICT in a partner university.
  2. The following sources of incompatibility were identified: heterogeneity of legislation on higher education and the national higher education systems; heterogeneity of national culture of the countries in which the universities are located; heterogeneity of conceptions of academic work and ideas about how academic work should be organized; heterogeneity of the division of authority between government/universities/faculties/academics; heterogeneity of formal organisational procedures of the universities; heterogeneity of the character of the universities (based on size, scope and age).
  3. In the original study, two additional performance indicators were used (see Beerkens, 2004).

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